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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard, "The Liturgical Lives of Pets" (2018). *Faculty Work Comprehensive List*. 917.

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The Liturgical Lives of Pets

Abstract

"Stewardship draws our hearts upward and downward, to not only the transcendent and sublime but also the immanent and mundane."

Posting about lessons learned from pet ownership from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-liturgical-lives-of-pets/>

Keywords

In All Things, pets, dogs, stewardship, wonder

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

in things

May 29, 2018

The Liturgical Lives of Pets

Howard Schaap

My wife warned me. “It’s an extra thing we don’t need in our lives,” she said. “We go away too much, and we have a hard enough time taking care of three kids—much less a dog.”

Somewhere in my bones, I knew she was right. Nonetheless, I persisted. It took three years, but I wore away her resistance. At the beginning of March, we got Kylo, a Lab-shorthaired-Weimaraner mix (that probably makes him a labrapointeraner).

It took three weeks, but I came to realize she was right.

The everydayness of pet care is what makes it liturgical. My life has literally been reshaped by Kylo. Taking him out is the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do at night. It has reshaped our garage and our budget and our relationship to our neighbors: this summer I will install some kind of fence to try to protect them from his invasions—and him from theirs.

Of course, what makes something liturgical is when the practices reshape our hearts and our desires. By now, we know the caricature of this type of person all too well, the person for whom the pet becomes ultimate: cat people; dog people; people who keep pythons that attempt to eat their children; ASPCA people. Becoming *that* kind of pet owner was actually one of the biggest drawbacks for me in getting a dog. Indeed, that annoying tone and verbiage of dog speak—“Good boy, Kylo, *such* a good boy”—has invaded our language.

Anthropomorphizing animals is its own kind of sin, it seems to me—that of remaking animals in our own image. It’s also very natural. Many of us who are parents already do this with our children; it just becomes more obvious when you and your Doberman dress in matching sweater vests.

The financial vortex of pet ownership is also easy to get swept up in. We bought Kylo a collar and then a bigger collar, a leash and then a thicker leash. I had a door made for my garage, and I will adapt a chain link fence for him. I bought a chew toy for while we are away, and my sister-in-law bought him a squeaky monkey. We pay for a monthly flea-and-tick treatment and could treat him for heartworm monthly, to say nothing of food and treats. Last year, US pet owners spent \$69.51 billion on their pets. Where your treasure is, there your heart is.

On the other side, there is the “utilizing” of animals—using them as tools or machines. Much of the conversation around “factory farms” is about this use of animals, as means to an end only.

As “man’s best friend,” dogs usually avoid this extreme, but even with Kylo I must confront these opposite poles.

For instance, I do have a use in mind for Kylo. This fall, I hope he makes our pheasant hunting more fruitful. And almost daily, I have to confront his “dogness.” Do we keep him in his kennel too long during the day? What kind of space does he need to roam?

On the other hand, there is something wonderful about the pure joy of “dogness,” too: to watch him tear around the loose dirt of the garden, or rip clothes off the line, or chase a squirrel is to consider something of the wonder of play as designed by the Creator. Then again, I’m trying to discipline his use of tooth and claw, surely another part of his “dogness.”

A sure sign of Kylo’s liturgical impact on our family is in our spiritual imaginations. For my kids, Kylo has made it into prayers of awe and thanksgiving; for me, confession.

Personally, the greatest impact Kylo has had is in perspective. This March and April, I saw more mornings and evenings while walking Kylo than I had seen in the same months over the last ten years. I came to know the difference between a northwest, north, and northeast wind. I walked in a near blizzard, risked a cloudburst, and felt the rumble of thunder on a gravel road. I saw a beaver’s first spring activity, startled an owl from a pine, and witnessed geese vying for nesting sites.

“I lift my eyes to the mountains,” the Psalmist says, “where does my help come from?” I had not considered lifting one’s eyes as a liturgical practice—until Kylo.

Of course, there is another view that dog walking offers, and this one is much more mundane. “I drop my eyes to my feet,” I might begin this other psalm. But even something like picking up poo has taught me something: stewardship is

liturgical. It's daily, seasonal, annual. It pays attention. It distinguishes. It plants and uproots, it feeds and picks up.

Scripture is full of liturgical animals. In the Old Testament, animals were important stand-ins between God and His people; liturgical animals carried the people's sin, thanksgiving, and hope, while priests were a kind of sacred butcher. In the New Testament, that pressure is taken off the animal kingdom, but they remain full beneficiaries of God's providential care and delight. Our own animals, too, should spur our spiritual imaginations, often in surprising, earthly ways.

So, would I recommend getting a pet? Not necessarily. Maybe a garden is more your style. I *would* recommend the kind of stewardship that turns your attention daily to the natural world. It's in doing these daily tasks that we image the Creator. Stewardship draws our hearts upward and downward, to not only the transcendent and sublime but also the immanent and mundane. It may not be easy, but pet ownership or garden-tending will change your habits and, Lord willing, it will tune your heart to Him through the wonder of His world.